

# Pompey's your man! Cicero's *De Imperio* *Gnaei Pompei*

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Cicero's speech in favour of giving Pompey the Great the command against Mithridates was delivered by Rome's greatest orator to support the greatest general at the time. The speech can be used as a lens through which to see the role of political oratory at Rome, the power-play in Roman politics and the intertwined nature of domestic and foreign policy in the Roman Republic.

## Playing to the people

In 66 B.C., Cicero looked out over the Forum in Rome to see a crowd of people occupying an architectural landscape memorializing Rome's past military achievements and the great deeds of individual Romans. Cicero stood on the rostra, the speaker's platform adorned with the ships' beaks taken in the first war against the Carthaginians two centuries earlier, and prepared himself to address the assembled crowd. He was praetor, the second-highest public office in Rome, and he was the leading orator in the city. Cicero was about to speak in favour of a popular proposal and to lend his support to Rome's most famous general at the time: Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus or Pompey the Great.

Cicero delivered his speech at a *contio*, an informal meeting usually held in the Roman Forum at which anybody could stop to listen to the speaker – citizens and non-citizens, men and women, free and slaves. But the speakers would usually address the crowd as the *populus Romanus* – the Roman people. The *contio* was a place for sharing of information, swaying of minds, and display of political credibility and oratorical ability. Indeed, Cicero wrote later in his history of oratory at Rome, the *Brutus*, that 'the characteristic feature of the greatest orator is that he is considered the greatest by the people'.

This was to be Cicero's first speech in the *contio*, but he had built up a public profile as a great orator through the law courts, speaking in defence of clients and, once, prosecuting in the high-profile case against Gaius Verres. Since the court cases were also conducted in the public space of

the Forum and since it was easier to be engaged as a barrister in the courts than be invited to speak at a *contio*, a forensic career was one possible in the public career of an ambitious man of the Roman elite.

## How do you solve the problem of Mithridates?

King Mithridates VI of Pontus, the north-eastern part of modern-day Turkey on the shores of the Black Sea, lay at the heart of Cicero's speech. Mithridates' active policy of expansion had led to a series of wars with Rome from the 90s B.C., with a string of Roman commanders such as Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Lucius Licinius Murena, and Lucius Licinius Lucullus fighting with Mithridates over the control of Asia Minor. In 88 B.C., the Romans attacked Pontus' neighbour Bithynia, and Mithridates responded by starting a mass killing of Romans – we hear of 80,000 dead, suggesting the scale of Mithridates' response and of Roman activity in Asia Minor. All Rome's best generals had tried their hand against Mithridates, but none had succeeded. Lucullus had fought Mithridates over a seven-year campaign which had been highly successful in pushing back Mithridates, expanding Roman control, and winning spectacular battles, but not in capturing or finishing off the king of Pontus. In 67 B.C., the command against Mithridates was passed from Lucullus to the consul Manius Acilius Glabrio, who achieved little. The war against Mithridates was far from concluded and it became an urgent political issue in 66 B.C.

## Extraordinary circumstances: extraordinary measures

But before we look at Manilius' proposal to pass the command against Mithridates over to Pompey, we need to understand the political situation in Rome in 66 B.C., and in particular, the way in which this command was given to Pompey. In 70 B.C., Pompey had been consul together with Marcus Licinius Crassus, and one of their consular acts had been to return the traditional powers of the tribunes of the plebs to that office after the dictator Sulla had curtailed them. This meant that the tribunes could again introduce legislation. Immediately, the tribunician assembly regained its importance as a locus for legislation and the *contio* its importance as a locus for public oratory.

In 67 B.C., the ten tribunes proposed legislation but disagreed with each other over it. One of the contentious issues was the proposal to give Pompey a special command to deal with the pirates of the Mediterranean. The disagreement arose over the extent of Pompey's powers in terms of tenure (three years), territory covered (all coastal areas up to 50 miles inland), the power possessed by Pompey (*imperium*), and the generous provisions (15 or 24 legates with *imperium*, a navy of 300 or 500 ships, power to levy recruits as he wished, and access to public funds) which superseded that of past and present commanders. The bill was passed in the tribunician assembly amid violent disorder and the threat of veto. Pompey left Rome to take up his command and finished off the pirates in an astonishing 50 days.

Against this record of success, the tribune Manilius proposed in early 66 B.C. that Pompey be given the command in the war against Mithridates by allocating him the areas Cilicia, Bithynia, and Pontus – the south-western and north-western parts of modern-day Turkey. The idea behind the proposal was evident: the war against Mithridates was left unfinished by Lucullus and Glabrio, Pompey was already in the area on his pirate command,

and Pompey had a track record of finishing off difficult wars (Sertorius in Hispania, Spartacus in Italy, and the pirates in the Mediterranean). Moreover, Pompey was popular with the people at Rome because of his previous military successes and carefully crafted public image: he was therefore a practical and popular choice. The bill passed without problems.

**This war is justified:  
Pompey's your man!**

Cicero's speech in favour of the bill was designed to win Cicero a share in Pompey's popularity. It was a deliberative speech, addressing the question of what to do in the current situation. Cicero put forward two main arguments in support of Manilius' bill: 1) that the command of Pompey was honourable as it involved the glory of Rome and as the provincials in the areas affected wished for action, and 2) that the command was advantageous as it would protect both Roman revenues coming from the East and efficient tax collection.

Cicero adapted the traditional outline of a deliberative speech to support his main point. He focused on the idea that the command was both honourable and advantageous, and he did so in three sections covering the nature of the war, the size and danger of the war, and the choice of commander. In using a simple structure, Cicero was adapting his content to the audience, who were not trained in rhetoric. But his simple structure also underlined his message that the case itself was straightforward: 'Pompey is your man'. Moreover, the structure allowed Cicero to avoid discussing the controversial issues of using a tribunician law to deal with an issue of foreign policy, and of giving an unusually large command to an already powerful general.

The section of the speech that deals with the choice of the commander is central to Cicero's attempt to obtain some of Pompey's popularity for himself. He argues that Pompey is the right choice for four reasons: Pompey possesses the necessary military knowledge, virtue, prestige, and luck. Cicero illustrates these four aspects of Pompey's profile through references to Pompey's past achievements. In doing so, Cicero both underlined an already popular message about Pompey, but he also tried to avoid alienating the powerful senators mentioned in the speech: Lucullus (Pompey's predecessor in the East), and the two opponents Hortensius and Catulus. Cicero knew he could not afford to make political enemies out of them, if he was to hope for further political office and influence.

**Game-changing command: career-**

**making speech**

Pompey's command, and his success in tackling Mithridates and conquering vast areas of the East, had a great impact on both domestic politics and foreign relations. During his time on the command, everybody was waiting for him. Once he returned, with enormous victories and large booty, his opponents snubbed him and this pushed him into the coalition with Caesar and Crassus which were to shape Roman politics for a decade and end disastrously in a civil war. Moreover, Roman foreign policy had to change in the light of Pompey's conquests, with larger areas to be governed. Furthermore, the influx of wealth from the East boosted the internal competition within the senatorial elite, who now began to show off their exploits and booty from campaign in competitive building works on an unprecedented scale: Pompey himself built an enormous theatre-complex complete with a temple to Venus Victrix, a portico-garden, and a senate house.

Cicero's speech helped Pompey to obtain the command that was to make a crucial difference to his career. Upon his return to Rome, Pompey became the big man in Rome with the wealth, connections and status to supersede almost all his peers. He became consul in 55 B.C. for the second time, and in 52 B.C. for the third time. He also held a prestigious and powerful command as leader of the Roman grain provision, and held command in Hispania whilst remaining in Rome. The speech itself arguably had a greater impact on Cicero's career as it marked out his support of Pompey for all to see, a support which he continued almost throughout his career. Moreover, through this speech and other speeches, he managed to put himself in the right position to be elected to the consulship of 63 B.C. The speech can be read as a reflection of Cicero's oratorical brilliance, of Cicero's political agenda at the time, of Roman foreign policy, of domestic politics at Rome, and of the superior position of Pompey the Great in Roman society and history.

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